

Human Remains Found at Sea: Lessons Learned

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Sea Service ministry is always full of challenges. Our shipmates often look to chaplains for guidance, both personal and professional. In some cases, there are set answers; in others, we must adapt and use the skills we have to make our best responses. During the recent deployment of the USS JOHN F. KENNEDY (CV 67) Battle Group from February through August 2002, three sets of human remains were discovered and retrieved from the sea. Each was handled differently from a medical, ethical and religious point of view. Each set of remains was discovered in a different location relative to a foreign country. Based on the customs and laws of each country, and the moral and ethical considerations of the JFK chain of command, the disposition of each was handled in a different way. The first person was found floating off the island of Crete shortly after a port visit there in early March. The second person was located in the northern Arabian Gulf near the United Arab Emirates. The third was recovered off Pakistan. The religious challenge and moral responsibility to properly dispose of the remains was a unique challenge in each case.

CASE ONE: The Cretan Woman

The USS JOHN F. KENNEDY had not been underway three hours from a port call in Crete when a body was discovered by a lookout. The body was retrieved by search and rescue (SAR) swimmers in a motor whaleboat and brought aboard at the stern dock. Chaplain David Mudd, JFK's Roman Catholic priest, and I met the body there. Father Mudd anointed the corpse and I said a Protestant prayer. Religious accommodation was based solely on assumptions; Crete is a predominantly Greek Orthodox country, so Christian prayers by liturgical traditions close to that faith were rendered over the body.

The next challenge involved ministering to the SAR swimmers and the boat crew that drew the person from the sea. It was determined that a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) did not

need to be conducted, but that an outbrief and sharing of feelings was appropriate. A simple message was shared with those who participated



in the recovery. We told them that they would be some family member's heroes because a lost relative would be returned for proper burial.

Several weeks later JFK's commanding officer received a letter from the woman's family expressing gratitude that their mother's body had been found. In the letter, the family called the JFK swimmers and boat personnel "heroes." It was a most heartwarming moment for all involved.

CASE TWO: The Man in the Gulf

In April, after a port visit to Bahrain, a second body was found floating in the waters of the Gulf of Oman. This time the remains were not intact. The boat crew and SAR swimmers literally fished parts and pieces from the sea. Since the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is predominately Muslim, yet has a varied and diverse faith tradition population, no assumptions were made as to the person's religious background. Chaplain Mudd and I offered generalized prayers. The remains were returned to the UAE.

Care of the SAR swimmers, boat crew, and medical personnel were more individualized and critical because of the state of the body. One of

the SAR personnel especially had great difficulty with the task he had to perform and was referred to the ship's psychologist.

CASE THREE: The Man from Pakistan

In May, while on station near Pakistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, a third body was found. Decomposed but still intact, the body was brought on board and the same procedure was followed as before. Chaplain Mudd offered prayers from his faith tradition and I from a Protestant faith tradition. This case had an added challenge—no country in the area would take the body. It was determined by the JFK chain of command to simply commit the remains back to the sea. An assumption was made that since Pakistan was an overwhelmingly Islamic country, the man was probably Muslim. Our Muslim lay leader, VS 31's LCDR Muhammad M. Frakhan, was asked to offer the *Namaz-e-Jinazah*, a traditional Islamic funeral prayer during a short and dignified burial at sea.

The invitation to be included in these procedures was an extremely moving one for the lay leader. Upon the completion of the burial at sea, he wrote the following reflection for the ship's PAO:

"I am the Islamic Lay Leader onboard the USS JOHN F. KENNEDY, a warship conducting flight operations in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Every day this warship launches dozens of jets that target Al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Ladin's followers. There is a widespread impression in the Islamic world that the United States is targeting Islam. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

"On April 28, 2002, I was going about my daily routine when I was asked by the ship's command chaplain, CDR Jon C. Fredrickson, to offer Namaz-e-Jinazah (funeral prayers) for a dead body that had been found floating in the water. I inquired, as to how the determination was made of the dead man's faith. I was told that since he was found in the waters surrounded by Islamic countries, it was assumed that he was a Muslim and the ship wanted to afford the man a decent burial with prayers offered by a member of his faith. I dutifully accepted, offered the prayer and a dignified burial at sea was performed. I was particularly overcome and touched by the efforts that this warship went through to arrange an Islamic burial

for a stranger who may have been of the same faith as that of the terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks. All this from a ship that is flying daily missions to bring to justice the people that had committed such a heinous crime against the United States and humanity.... The United States is not at war with Islam. The reverence shown to this complete stranger of the Islamic faith couldn't be possible if the United States military detested Islam. There was no discrimination here. The thought was for this man's family. The regard given to him and the way in which the ceremony was conducted was of the utmost respect and caring for a human being."



The inclusion of the SAR swimmers, the boat crew and attending medical personnel as silent witnesses to the burial at sea proved to be a more powerful healing and closure practice than any or all of the counseling and outbriefing efforts that we had done before.

Conclusion

In the end, the most powerful healing tool for SAR and boat personnel turned out to be religious ritual. None of the JFK personnel needed to share the same religious preference as the person whose remains were retrieved from the sea, but the inclusion of some form of religious rite or ceremony gave great comfort and closure to all involved. Most enduring was the concept of affording simple dignity to each person found.

These three episodes reinforce the importance of the chaplain having an understanding of faiths other than his own. As well, they emphasize the benefit of having trained lay leaders for every possible faith tradition. We never know what situation may face us. As the experts on religion and culture, we must prepare ourselves and equip our ministry for as wide a contingency as possible.